

## Brace Yourself.....Chapter 5

*(The following is the fifth chapter of Jerry Epperson's account of his life with polio. Enjoy, the Editor)*

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Chapter 5

In addition to the paralyzed left leg, other clear evidence of my polio were hammertoes on my right foot, as the tendons tightened and made the toes go into a permanent claw-like position. Since the toes do not touch down normally, this reduces balance, especially forward and backwards. It also results in corns and calluses, and extreme difficulty breaking in new shoes.

The tendons drawing up had two other obvious affects: very high arches in both feet, and tight heel cords so when relaxed, the foot points down, not at a 90° angle to the leg, as is normal. This lends to the foot dragging as I pull it forward to take a step.

My father was well over six feet tall and I would have been as well, instead of just six foot. Both legs were shortened by the polio, and I ended up with my right leg being about an inch and a half shorter than my left. Of course, this added to my limp.

From the waist up, my body is proportioned to be six foot four. My legs are more appropriate for someone five foot seven or eight. In apparel terms, I am long-waisted, and in trousers, a long-rise. Just to round out the picture, my arms are an ape-like thirty-seven inches, an impossible-to-find arm length in normal shirts.

I was taught to walk wearing a long leg brace on my paralyzed left leg and a below the knee brace on the right. These required truly hideous high-top shoes and crutches. The high-top shoes and braces were to help keep my feet at the normal ninety degree angle, and not allow them to drop as they do when relaxed.

The left brace curved under my buttocks so I would “sit” into the brace, which supported me with two metal rails on either side of the leg. A leather pad at my knee, secured by leather straps kept my leg straight (not bending) when walking. Several leather covered metal bands behind the leg kept the leg from bending backwards – always a danger since there are no muscles to prevent it. If I were to stand without this brace and put weight on the leg, it would bend backwards (hyper-extend) and break. Ouch.

Both braces had pegs on the bottom that snapped into the heels of my shoes. On occasion these would pop out, sometimes creating a gradual fall. Because I could feel this, usually I let myself down gently into a seat or onto the floor.

When you think about it, the foot bends at the ankle, not the heel, so these type braces caused pain across the top of the foot over time and with use. Later, the braces were modified to have an ankle joint which helped greatly. These had a screw and bolt that would fall out regularly, and I could usually feel it and fall gently or ask for help to a seat. I have spent hours looking for those special #!%# screws. After a while, you learned to hate this type of problem.

As I grew into being a teenager, I was allowed to walk without the half brace on my right leg, and to wear more normal looking shoes, not the ugly high-tops. (Yeah!) Although others probably did not notice, this was a big deal to me.

Also, after years of my weight going onto my left knee, I asked that the brace be modified with straps above and below the knee, and the removal of the pad on the kneecap. The knee had become hyper-sensitive to the touch after years of pressure.

Because of the polio, my feet never grew normally. As an adult, I wear a size four shoe on my left foot and a size six on my right. For a six footer, shoe sizes of ten to twelve would be more normal. Once again, this affected my balance greatly.

Imagine standing on a brace which you cannot control other than to put weight on it, and on a very small foot with dysfunctional toes. Just standing still is a chore without something to lean on, at least a cane.

Consider walking. To take a step, I swing the left leg forward using my hip. Because the foot is held at a 90° angle, the left foot always lands on the rear edge of the heel, not on the full foot as normal. On a wet or slick surface, this just slides forward and “BAM” you have fallen.

To go down stairs, you swing the left leg out, and bend the right knee until you sense the left foot is on the lower stair. Then you can gently lift the right foot and lower it to the next stair. Each stair requires this same process because the left leg cannot be bent.

On the rare occasion, the metal rails on the brace would snap and throw me into a fall. Once or twice, the broken metal would rip into the flesh of the leg, a nasty occurrence.

Early in my work at Scott & Stringfellow, my brace snapped suddenly just below the knee, throwing me into a row of file cabinets. Books and “stuff” on top of the cabinets went everywhere, and I ended up in a pile on the floor. The crash brought folks in from around the firm. All you can do is laugh it off, and ask someone to go to my car and get the emergency crutches.

Other times the lock on the knee of the brace would not catch so when I would stand, the left leg would bend and, again, create a fall. This was fairly common, and more embarrassing than harmful.

Walking was not a mindless task. There were times my mind would wander or I would be talking, and forget to throw my left leg forward, causing an immediate tumble, face first. This never fails to impress clients, as it did when taking an out-of-town visitor to lunch. I fell crossing the street, too.

Obviously I never could run, although this was challenged years later. My work required a lot of air travel and I would have to race as fast as I could to keep up with the mob exiting planes. I noticed that at the top of the ramp, I was often breathless and nearly faint. Soon, I realized that while trying to remember to swing my leg, hold onto a briefcase and cane, I was forgetting to breathe. I know it sounds impossible, but its true.

One last thought on the brace. A new brace did not adjust to your leg – your leg had to adjust to the brace. Until the skin would toughen where the brace touched and rubbed, there was bruising and sometimes broken skin. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, it was suggested you use a “horse salve” to toughen your skin where it was rubbed by the brace. It had been developed to help horse’s skins under saddles. In the 1970’s, I was told that over many years of use, the “horse salve” made the skin thinner and more likely to tear. Lucky me.

Walking with an obvious limp honestly never bothered me. Unless it was pointed out to me, or I had a fall or a challenge getting around, I forgot about it. When I was

allowed to walk without the right leg brace and the crutches, it was easy to forget about the limp doing everyday activities. Locking and unlocking the brace to sit or stand was automatic, and somehow my brain adapted to my head moving side to side as I walked, without losing focus.

You get used to children asking “What’s wrong with him, Mommy?” and even some good-natured teasing. I remember friends mimicking my limp, looking to me more like the grandfather in “The Real McCoy’s”, who also had a limp. His looked more like he had a rock in his shoe, at least to me.

I would try to make light of it when I could. I told people that on Halloween, I limped on the opposite leg so no one could recognize me. I was also tempted to dress up as Igor, Dr. Frankenstein’s assistant, on Halloween but dragging my leg didn’t appeal to me. Even so, my feelings would get hurt on occasion. I still remember Mrs. Lenz, my friend Larry’s mother, telling me she didn’t want me sitting on her sofa because I just flopped down. Truthfully, with only one knee that worked, when I unlocked my brace I had a difficult time gently lowering myself into a seat. She was right – I just didn’t like to hear it.

Much of my life was spent going to doctors. While Dr. Herbert Park was my primary polio doctor in Richmond, I had a Dr. Good in Warm Springs. Of course, I had a general practitioner, a dentist that met every requirement for a horror film, and my eye doctor, Dr. Burton. In addition, there were visits to the Powell’s “brace shop” for the braces, crutches and the special mis-matched shoes (i.e. they were different sizes) that had to be fitted onto the brace. They also needed other adaptations like massive arch supports and steel shanks. The people at Powell’s became like family to me over the decades.

By the way, it is difficult to be 100% reliant upon things mechanical that wear or break. The best plans can be ruined by a broken strap, a lost screw or worse. Even today, scooters and handicapped accessible ramp-vans dictate my life. I rarely get angry at people, but I lose my temper with things easily.

One bright spot growing up was my physical therapist, Mrs. Crawley, from Blackstone. My legs and trunk had to be stretched regularly after my nearly a year in Warm Springs to keep the tendons from contracting, perhaps requiring additional surgery. I would lay on our kitchen table on a sheet, in my underwear, and she would twist my legs in different ways, making certain they had full flexibility, bending my knees then straightening the legs fully, and then she would work on my ticklish feet, especially under the arches where tendons had been repaired. She would stretch the six or seven incisions, and then massage my muscles to keep them loose.

The massage was tricky. My left leg is just flesh, no muscles, so it had no resistance and is easily bruised or hurt. In flexing, it must be held gently or it would just fall off the table.

In sharp contrast, my right leg was doing the work of two, and it was extremely muscular. To keep it stretched and flexible was a chore, and a lot of work.

Mrs. Crawley also worked on my back and especially on my left side where a major tendon transplant had occurred and left a scar from my groin to my hip bone.

She visited me weekly from when I was ten to until I was well into high school. Her daughter, maybe six or eight years older than me, learned from her and actually did some of my physical therapy toward the end.

This hour and a half visit made Mrs. Crawley a very special friend and confidant. We could talk about things that I could never discuss with my parents.

I was nearly 50 before I found another physical therapist as good as Mrs. Crawley. Too many could not handle the gentle needs of the paralyzed leg and the workout the good leg needed, without doing more harm than good.

By the way, lying on our kitchen table in my underwear getting bent in every way possible never slowed the traffic flow through our home. There were my friends, my mother's friends and neighbors, and even some of my sister's friends, all of whom would drop by for a visit or some food. This seemed true everywhere I went for treatment. At hospitals or physical therapists, privacy was minimal. Where they had the curtains that would be pulled shut for privacy, they seldom were. There was no privacy at all in Warm Springs. I still remember the doctors bringing by patients and others, who knows who, to see my scars and learn how I was being treated. This is tough on a kid.

One last example, if I may. I had just returned home from surgery, a treatment or whatever, but I could not walk. In bed, I was forced to use a bed pan – never a popular choice – and while so engaged, a flock of my friends came in the house to see me and my mother said to my horror, “go on back – he's in his room”.

I challenge anyone to display any dignity on a bed pan.

